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Speech Enhancer Offers Help For Parkinson's, ALS Patients

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WVIT-TV

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Many patients who have debilitating diseases such as Parkinson's disease or ALS struggle to communicate and a new technology is helping people speak and live fuller lives.

Communication is what makes a marriage work, just ask Ray and Marie Franco, who have been together for 47 years and are still going strong.

Late last year, Marie was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease -- ALS -- which severely impaired her speech.

"A lot of sounds I can't make. The G the H, I can't make them anymore," she said.

However, that may not be the case much longer because of New Britain's Hospital For Special Care, which recently provided Marie with the Speech Enhancer, a voice processor that is relatively new to Connecticut.

It filters out bad elements of a person's speech, breathiness or hoarseness.

"When I turn my back I can understand what she's saying to me, so I'll be in the other end of the room and she'll be talking with this and I understand," Ray Franco said. "It helps."

Hospital staff members work with each patient individually to match them with the right equipment for them.

Another patient talks with his eyes through a computer attached to a camera that tracks the man's eye movement and converts it to speech. The system called ERICA also allows patients to make phone calls, surf the Internet, alert staff of aches or pains and communicate with loved ones.

The speech enhancer costs about \$7,900. The ERICA eye gaze system averages at around \$10,000.

Medicare covers some of the cost. If you're interested, see a speech pathologist and ask for help to find alternative funding sources.



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